

Forever a Light-year Apart

By: CalicoCat

Though you travel a thousand light-years, she will always remain one year ahead of you.

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Chapter 1

“I can’t wear this. It’s ridiculous.”

“It’s a requirement. The Student Council President has to wear the uniform.”

She’s laughing. They’re all laughing. It’s just a bad joke; any moment now the façade will crack and someone will let on that the mantle of responsibility will be going somewhere else, anywhere else.

But nobody cracks.

“Just who voted for me anyway?”

“Everyone voted for you. Everybody except one. Someone voted for Mankanshoku. Might that have been you, Ryuko?”

The official pantsuit looks terrible on you, and you realize just how much better it looked on your sister. Mako’s laughing so much there are tears streaming down her face, but she doesn’t realize that if you’re going down then you’re taking her with you: the head of the Disciplinary Committee has also been vacated, and there’s a uniform with her name on it. Satsuki laughs again, and you suspect she knows what you have in mind.

You’re eighteen.

She’s nineteen.

The humidity is murderous, and the ramen shop is heaving, but the two of you find a table under an air-con and you slurp noodles noisily.

“I saw Mako and Ira last week,” you begin; you know that your sister’s been buried under work. “The honeymoon was a hit - who’d

have thought that a world tour of steel mills and croquette factories would make such an impression. Thanks for picking up the tab, Satsuki.”

She whisks her miso, and looks slyly back at you.

“No need to thank me. It’s your inheritance I’m spending too.”

You don’t mind; after your delinquent years, the money you have access to now seems almost limitless.

“Mako’s beginning to show a bit now. Either that or her mother’s force-feeding her. The big guy blubbed like a little kid when he showed me the ultrasounds.”

“And?”

She rests her chin on one hand, looking at you. She still takes your breath away when she does that, not that you’d ever admit it.

“And... I told him to wipe his own tears?” Half-statement, half-question, you’re unsure whether it’s what she’s looking for.

She smiles; it’s something she does naturally these days.

“And... Is it a boy or a girl?”

You’re wrong-footed for a moment, but plough on regardless.

“A girl. Mako wants to call her Ryuko. Ira wants to call her Satsuki.”

Her eyes narrow for a second, and there’s a momentary flash in them, just as there used to be.

“So the battle begins anew, Matoi.”

“I’ll arm wrestle you for the honor of naming her, Kiryuin.”

She shrugs off her smart formal jacket, and you're surprised to see a flash of lace, visible through the sheer fabric of her white shirt.

"Wow... you finally got round to ditching those god-awful white skivvies. Don't tell me you're seeing someone."

She blushes and wrinkles her nose slightly, a tic you've discovered that telegraphs her embarrassment.

This should be good. You stop eating and lean forward, pressing the attack.

"So... Is it someone I know...?"

The wrinkle persists.

"Someone, shall we say... *compact*...? With a tuba fixation?"

She can't meet your gaze anymore, and has to look away. You'd never have believed that the girl who would spit in the eye of the Grim Reaper could be so shy.

You're twenty four.

She's twenty five.

She isn't normally late, and for a change she has to make apologies when you're already seated when she arrives.

"Board meeting ran on."

She slides into her chair. She's growing her hair out again, just past her shoulders. The style is nostalgic, but you can see silver already, mixed in with the black, like the first warning raindrops ahead of a storm.

"Houka tells me you've become quite the expert with these things", said as she pulls a laptop from her bag, tossing it over to you. It

boots part-way, then stalls, when you power it on.

“There was a link for free oboes,” Satsuki explains.

“And Nonon clicked on it.”

“Nonon clicked on it.”

It’s a rootkit or similar, and will need more attention than you can spare at the table. You could give it to Houka, but it’s the first time your sister has asked for your help in a technical sense, and it feels like an opportunity not to be squandered, that she wants you to prove something.

“And how is the little lady?” You wish she was present to hear that, but you know Satsuki will only report the edited highlights.

“She sends her regards.”

“She told you to punch me, didn’t she?”

A smile is her only response: all that is necessary.

“No one in your life, at present?” She arches an eyebrow, smoothly sweeping some tuna sashimi through soy sauce, before topping it with a blistering charge of wasabi. “I thought there was...”

That was a long time ago, and you shake your head softly. It hadn’t ended well when she’d wanted to move in with you, to spend a lifetime together, unaware of exactly what that would mean. So now it’s just brief liaisons, cut off abruptly, before they realize they’re dating a fossil: a changeless girl cast in amber. And it’s got easier now, after the tenth or eleventh time, to say,

“You need to move on.”

“I’m holding you back.”

And sometimes, just simply, “You’ve changed.”

“Not thinking of kids?” You try to restart the conversation in another direction. “You know they can mash your DNA together to make a child now; she’d be beautiful and musical...”

“Or she might just be short and tone deaf.” It’s a joke about one of her few failings, the one most frustrating to Nonon, but she’s surprisingly blunt, like the subject is sensitive, frequently trodden. “No - no more Kiryuins. Not by adoption or blood; it ends here with me. If you want to see children, go and see Mako.”

But it’s increasingly difficult to visit your friends, at least the ones that have families: to explain your gradual transition from aunt, to cousin and one day to niece. Especially hard for your namesake: the girl that for a while at least, felt as much your daughter as Mako’s. Her parents can only say, *Auntie Ryuko works overseas now, so she can’t come to see you. But we know she’s always thinking of you.*

You look at your sister. You want to go back to the mansion with her, to hear her complain when you kick off your shoes and put feet on the sofa. But there’s a part of you missing when Satsuki’s not there, and though you’ve come to like Nonon (a secret you’ll take to the grave) you can’t bear it when the two of them go up to bed, Nonon’s hand at the small of her back, and you’re left with only the TV for company. So you say nothing, and finish your meal in silence, and just pass her coat when she rises to leave.

“Your daughter’s very beautiful. I can see the family resemblance,” the waitress remarks as Satsuki pays.

“I’m not...” you begin, but your sister places her hand gently on your arm.

“I’m very proud of her,” she says with a smile.

You’re thirty-nine.

She’s forty.

She still wears her ring, but she no longer listens to music: the Bechstein in the mansion's parlor locked closed for a while now, just a small urn symmetrically placed on the sound board. She walks with a stick, too, not because her step is uncertain, but because she's unsure whether her bones will endure hand-to-hand combat these days, and having a weapon to hand seems a prudent precaution. A silver-headed cane, aged ebony, it clacks on the tiles of the restaurant as she approaches; you'd called it *Shin Bakuzan* when you first saw it, and the name had stuck even though you'd said it in jest. The black has gone from her hair, replaced with pure silver that's almost metallic when the light catches it right; she looks distinguished, still beautiful, but a little more lined, a little more lived-in.

"I'm sorry I missed your graduation. Again."

You'd taken to studying, because three or four years is as long as you can stay in one place without anyone spotting your agelessness. It started with mechanics and a desire to fix things; to maintain the motorbike that you treasure, the one that she bought you for your eighteenth. Then physics, literature, biology, even a music degree a long time ago, just to annoy Nonon (though your compositions remained uniformly awful). Whatever the knowledge, the fibers within you take it all in and catalogue perfectly, the only requirement on you your attendance at lectures and sitting exams; a strange kind of cheating. Languages, too, you attempted - but though the words and the grammar, semantics and syntax, are present and perfect, your accent is terrible and you gave up after English and a touch of Chinese.

Satsuki's meal is depressingly healthy: tempura vegetables, delicately seasoned. Your burger looks clumsy in comparison: the meal as a metaphor for you both.

"Father would be happy that you excelled academically, even if it took a while." It won't be the first time you've had this particular lecture, "But what are you planning to do with it all?"

“You know it’s tough for me to hold down a job with my condition, Satsuki.”

Bar work, construction, temporary secretary - all jobs unlikely to attract too much attention, easily picked up and easily left. Easy to avoid attachments too, as easy as red, swollen eyes and a streaming nose and sometimes a final few words of “Take care of yourself.”

“And how is that?” She watches you for signs of deception.

“The patient remains in a stable, but critical, condition.”

“Critical?” She doesn’t give much away, but you see the beautifully-shaped eyebrows furrow for a moment.

“Critically unchanging. Critically static. Critically dull.”

She puts down her *hashi* and dabs the corner of her mouth with a starched white napkin.

“You need to start thinking about investments for the future.”

You lean back, cradling your head in interlocked fingers. As usual she’s right, but you don’t like it when she plays the big sister.

“Ryuko... I wanted to talk,” she begins, and you feel the world drop away. You’ve developed a dread of *that* conversation, the one that ends with a number of days, weeks or months, and she sees the panic cross your face.

“Nothing like that,” she says, taking your hand.

“I’m divesting the company of our holdings in clothing. Focusing us on advanced materials for medical and aerospace. I thought you should know: for the future, as I said.”

Relief makes you grin, “Oh, but doesn’t it just rankle that it’s only me that got to see Earth from orbit.”

“Perhaps I’ll see it too, one day,” she says wistfully.

The meal is finished with coffee, petit fours and small talk; if you close your eyes it could be twenty years, forty years, sixty years earlier.

You hold the door open for her as you leave, and the maître d’ remarks, “Grandchildren are such a blessing,” as she passes.

“C’mon, granny,” you snipe, thinking that she’ll at least try to hit you with her cane for your impertinence, but this time she doesn’t, just taking your arm and resting her head on your shoulder.

There are kids gathering outside on the sidewalk, passing earbuds between them, just as you once did. The cycle of fashion has swung from extreme to conservative and back to extreme again, and the results are quite eye-opening. She looks at them all with mock disapproval.

“Young people today: going out with scarcely a stitch to cover their modesty.”

“Terrible,” you agree, though you secretly wonder how you’d look in those jeans and that jacket.

“When we were their age a Kamui was respectable; it left something to the imagination,” she says, her expression impressively deadpan.

You try to keep a poker face, but you can’t help but smirk. You lean close to her ear and whisper,

“You’d still fill out Junketsu just fine, Sis.”

She squeezes your arm, and together you walk through the crowds to the metro.

You’re seventy-nine.

She’s eighty.

She lived a long, almost happy life in the end; that girl who thought she'd not live to see nineteen. But whether it was tai chi, and chai teas, runs, early nights and cold showers, or just her innate bloody-mindedness, she outlived all of your friends and even their children.

And she didn't run down, or wear out, or fade away, she just... stopped. She worked up to the last, as a consultant after she stepped down as director, deciding that youth should be given a chance, when youth was a man near sixty who walked slower than she did. She went to bed one night, and the next day she finally took that lie-in you'd been telling her to for so long, the tea going cold, slowly, by her bed-side.

She left no family, no children or siblings as far as anyone knew. There were rumors, of course, rumors that she'd once had a sister, a monster she'd kept locked in the depths of the mansion, but no one respectable, or sensible, paid them attention. Those, at least, made you smile, at a time when smiles were uncommon currency. The instructions in her will were as terse and as logical as expected from her, but the Board of Directors still declared a company-wide holiday, and staff in Japan were allowed to attend a memorial if they were able, though the email made clear that travel would *not* be reimbursed. And that, you thought, would have made her smile too.

You stood in line with the others, wearing a fake company ID: chosen at random from the myriad you'd made over the years. They filed past the memorial in solemn procession, each person stopping to bow, and eventually it came to your turn. You knew it would be hard, you'd tried to prepare, but when you approached you discovered they'd not chosen a picture of her as she was now: a distinguished, silver-haired matriarch. Instead one taken just after she assumed full control of the conglomerate, her hair still short, and wearing the necklace that Nonon had bought for their engagement. The perfect recall you'd come to rely on, rose up against you this time: serving up faultless recollections of friends meeting on a summer afternoon, crushing you with the force of a lucid dream. Your

knees gave way as the ghosts pressed you down, friends long and recently gone, the weight of the years more than even the life fibers could bear, and all you could do was sob in front of the flowers and incense and the portrait of a young woman of twenty-five, at most twenty-six, years.

They helped you to a chair after a while, and left you there to your own devices, to compose yourself, muttered embarrassment echoing round you.

Did you ever meet her? An elderly gentleman stood at your side, and placed a hand kindly on your shoulder.

Between sniffs, and rubbing your eyes, you were able to nod.

Thank you, he said. Thank you for coming and showing how much she meant, even to our youngest employees.

You remembered him then: the name, the posture, the light regional accent. You'd been there when Satsuki had interviewed him, four decades ago, just hanging around, waiting for lunch with your sister. His suit hadn't fitted so well, back then, and the intervening years had lent him a certain gravitas, but it was still the young man that had dropped all his papers as he'd gone into her office. She'd seen you, waiting in the hallway, and had rolled her eyes as he clumsily tried to collect them; *sometimes pigs in human clothing would truly seem to make more effective employees*, she'd said later, as you dined.

He didn't remember you, of course, but you took the whisky he offered anyway, and the shot from the small silver flask quieted the ghosts, and settled your nerves. She had been right to employ him, her judgment as sound as you'd come to expect.

And now you stand in the mansion. It's silent, the tall clock in the hallway run down with no one to wind it. It's not your home, it never felt like home - home was the Matoi residence, long burnt to the ground. So coming here always felt like visiting relatives, and after a

while, when the sharp edges of awkwardness had been worn smooth by familiarity, it felt like visiting your best friend. You remember every stupid trick you pulled at her expense: switching off the hot water when she was in the shower, locking her out in the grounds in only her robe, her roar of “Matoi!” when she discovered you’d glued all her stationery to her desk.

The Scissor Blades are stored in the vault beneath the house, hidden carefully away because sharp objects shouldn’t be left out where children might find them. You wonder for a moment whether it would kill you, if you were to run onto them; or whether they’d only shatter like Bakuzan in the hands of your mother, and be absorbed like you absorbed everything else. Satsuki would scold you for even having the thought, but you begin to understand Ragyo’s desire for equal companionship, twisted though it might have been: life fibers exist, they replicate, they spread, but they don’t get lonely and they don’t feel loss. Your mother would say that sentimentality makes them weaker, lessens their status as a perfect organism, but Satsuki and Senketsu would say that you’ve improved on perfection, even if it comes with a cost.

The urn is heavy in your hands, the weight of a lifetime. It’s impossible, you know, but somehow it still feels warm.

You set it down and look about in the half-light of evening. Everything from the staircase that creaks on the third step to the polished silver cutlery and fine bone china is yours now, her estate signed over in its entirety to the cryptic concern known as “Matoi Industrial”, employees - one. You imagine she chuckled when she did that, her lawyers confused by her plans. You read the paperwork twice through for completeness, just as she would have done, and then you go to sign.

The pen has been glued to the table.

“Kiryuin,” you think to yourself, with a smile. It’s impossible to shout at her now.

You're one hundred and two.

She's one hundred and three.

There's a dull thump as the umbilical detaches, your limbs momentarily leaden as the ship moves forward on maneuvering thrusters. You clear the dock and rig for interstellar flight, the flexible panels of the hull changing shape and thousands of square meters of sail deploying, opening out like a multiform butterfly.

It's taken hundreds of billions of Yen, and tens of thousands of people, and full thirty years to get to this point. You think and you hope that, amongst all those people, no one will have noticed that always, on some project, in some country, working for a sub-contractor or the conglomerate itself, there was a young woman with a bright splash of red in her hair. Wherever she was, whatever the task, she would join for a while, and quietly and without fuss make a small, but critical difference: resolving the bug that no one could find, repairing the system that no one could fix, completing a design with an insight that her age made surprising. She kept herself to herself, by and large, but sometimes after a long shift when everyone's sleeves were rolled up, and foreheads were dripping with sweat and fingertips were frayed with cuts from sharp panels, she would join the rest of the team for a beer, or five, and tell stories of the earlier days of the company. She had so many tales that her co-workers assumed she was a second or third generation employee, that her parents or grandparents had been employed by the Kiryuins and maybe even met the director who'd set the company on the path it now followed. And some of the stories seemed a little tall, truth to be told, but she spun the tales with such enthusiasm that nobody thought to call her out on them: how a girl had rescued workers at a plant in Chennai from a chemical fire, the engineer that had repelled a pirate attack on a corporate freighter, or the young woman that led a party of preschoolers out from the ruins of a nursery after the second Great Kanto earthquake. After a few months, or maybe a year, or at most two, she would move on, and in time she was

forgotten, her passage marked only by the small changes she'd made. You used many names over those years, but mostly you used "Ryuko Matoi" because it's always easier to answer to your true self, and nobody seemed to be counting, and once or twice you used "Satsuki Matoi" just because you wanted to hear her name again, to hear someone else call it out.

It will take three years of constant acceleration to reach cruising velocity, close enough to the speed of light that you'll see photons passing you leisurely, like cars changing lanes on the Honnou expressway. Then four years of stable, uneventful progression, and another three year slow-down to return to a standstill, watching the universe unfold around you. Two years they gave you to survey the planets of Alpha Centauri, then ten years again to return - at least, that's what the mission profile requires. The selection committee were surprised when a young woman straight out of university applied to the pilot program, but you explained that you were an orphan, no living friends or family, and besides you'd only be middle-aged, if that, by the time you returned. There was little they could do when you aced the mental and physical tests, easily surpassing astronauts, naval aviators and air force pilots, and besides your eerie, encyclopedic knowledge of every aspect of the program made you the natural, made you the only choice in the end.

From the screens and the console of the command module you see the glass and the green of the hydroponics bay. In the end you're thankful for it, even though for you it's unnecessary - you don't breathe the air and won't need the food - but it reminds you of leafy spaces around the mansion, and walks in the summer through overgrown pathways, and ice teas with friends under the pagoda. The exterior views show the sails, fully deployed now, iridescent as the sun rises over the arc of horizon, bringing Japan into daylight for your last day near Earth and your home. Harvesting the cosmic background radiation, they give the ship almost unlimited range - a three mast schooner propelled by the storms of creation. And the energy they draw will sustain you, through your symbiotic fibers: the ship complementing as much as conveying you. So it only seemed

logical then, the name that you chose for it; there'd been raised eyebrows, certainly, when you'd asked the ground crew to stencil it onto the hull, along with a caricature of a *seifuku* drawn in black, red and gold. When they'd asked, you'd explained with a smile that you wanted to remember happy years when you'd been at school, and if they thought it strange that something surely so recent could be so nostalgic, they'd known better than to press the point and simply did as requested. It was your ship, after all.

Only a few minutes remain until the main engines fire, beginning your journey out of the solar system. From the depths of your flight bag you pull out a sealed metal canister, and set it down near you, magnets locking it into place with a resonant click. A second canister follows and you place it alongside; it's smaller, and that was your little joke, even though tears blurred your vision as you shoveled the ashes into it back in the mansion, the last thing you did before you left. Maybe you're becoming sentimental in your old age, but this is a one-way trip, and you know they would want to be together.

You won't be heading back this way for a while, despite everyone's carefully laid plans. Even with Relativity, and time dilation, it won't be possible to explain why you return home no older than when you left: Dorian Gray in a flight suit. So when the survey's complete, and the last image has been captured, the last sample analyzed and the last byte transmitted, in short when you've paid off your debt, you'll override the flight plan and rather than pointing towards Earth you'll set a new destination. Maybe the center of the galaxy, to see the supermassive black hole that one of your lecturers once told you of, or maybe you'll tilt the ship out of the plane of the Milky Way, and head towards Canis Major, the dwarf galaxy some 25,000 light-years distant: 250 lifetimes away.

The vibrations crescendo as the engines reach full power, a hand pressing you firmly into your seat as the acceleration begins. By the viewport that shows Earth turning below there's a picture of you, Mako and Satsuki, taken just after the dust of the conflict had settled. You'd grown tired of printing it again and again, each copy seemingly

less durable than the last, and had it formed instead into a block of colored, translucent polymer composite. Light from the sunrise catches it as the ship surges forward, and it casts a projection onto the far wall of the capsule, like stained glass in a cathedral.

You're one hundred and forty years old now.

And she's one hundred and forty-one.

Look after your sister...

You think of the promise, and though you make light of it, you know it will always be there now, there at the back of your mind. After a lifetime of silence it's hard to express it: words are too clumsy, and blushing too easy, but it's enough to know that you're bonded by blood. She's there by your side, as indescribable energies build around you, propelling you forward to an uncertain future.

You're eighteen.

She's seventeen.

In the Autumn mountains

The colored leaves are falling.

If I could hold them back,

I could see her still.

- Kakinomoto no Hitomaro